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SUBJECT: ELECTORAL COMMISSION REMAINS INEFFECTIVE,
INEFFICIENT

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1B. LILONGWE 124

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Ineffectiveness and inefficiency have marked the Malawi Electoral Commission's (MEC) preparations for the May 18 elections. One million "extra" names on the official voting roster, overexpenditures resulting in a 26% increase in the elections budget, and failure to assure equitable coverage by the state-owned media are issues MEC has not yet resolved. These issues, along with concerns about polling logistics, have been apparent since the January registration period ended, and MEC has done little to rectify them. As international observers arrive and elections debate intensifies, time is running out for MEC. END SUMMARY.

ONE MILLION "EXTRA" REGISTERED VOTERS

12. (SBU) After completing the initial processing of registration forms, the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) announced the official rolls have 6.6 million registered voters. The National Statistics Office (NSO) subsequently stated that the estimated voting-age population of Malawi is 5.5 million. When queried about the one million "extra" names on the rolls (assuming a full 100% of eligible voters registered), MEC officials publicly conceded that their figures may be inflated by the inclusion of deceased voters, voter transfers, and underage registrants on the rolls (reftel B). MEC hopes registered voters and political party officials will help "clean up" the voter rolls during the verification process on April 28 and 30. However, opposition parties and civil society leaders, noting the verification process was supposed to last a full week and was to have been completed by now, have argued that two days are insufficient for the rolls to be accurately verified, and they have suggested the inflated numbers are evidence of rigging.

26% INCREASE IN ELECTIONS BUDGET

13. (SBU) As of mid-March, it became clear that MEC had overspent its original budget of USD 14.6 million, and so it initiated a round of meetings with the Ministry of Finance (MOF) and the donor community to approve a new budget of USD 25 million. Negotiations eventually produced a new budget of USD 18.4 million, a 26% increase from the original. While MEC has asked the donor community and MOF to "sign on" to the new budget, it has received no firm commitments of new funding. The donor community, which has provided almost USD 6 million in elections support, is unwilling to offer any substantial new assistance. It is unclear at this time how the GOM will make up the shortfall.

UNEQUAL COVERAGE BY STATE-OWNED MEDIA

14. (SBU) Since the official campaign period began on March 20, state-owned radio and TV, the only media with national reach, have provided the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) with highly unequal access to airtime. According to the MEC Media Monitoring Unit, which produces weekly reports on media coverage of political parties, the ratio of ruling-to-opposition party overall coverage by Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) radio was 19-to-1. For TV Malawi (TVM), it was 5-to-1.

15. (SBU) The MEC Media Monitoring Unit has made its media analysis public, but only at the insistence of the donor community. MEC officials, while reluctantly acknowledging a problem of media access exists, say they are powerless to force the media houses to comply with the elections legislation that requires MBC and TVM to provide equitable access to political parties. Civil society and opposition parties have repeatedly raised these concerns with MEC and say the MEC has the authority to ensure compliance, and the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has filed lawsuits against MEC, MBC, and TVM.

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATIONS

16. (U) The European Union Elections Observation Team arrived on April 6, and at an April 8 press conference said that their initial observations were that opposition parties lacked access to public media and that the ruling UDF appeared to be using state resources in its campaign. These

observations, the EU Team said, would appear in their final report on the election's overall freeness and fairness. SADC Parliamentary Forum and British Commonwealth Secretariat Observer Teams are also scheduled to observe the elections.

HAPLESS CONSULTATIVE FORUM MEETING

17. (SBU) At an April 19 National Elections Consultative Forum (NECOF) meeting, civil society, political parties, and other interested groups questioned MEC on the voter rolls, the elections budget, and opposition access to media. MEC, MBC, TVM, and ruling UDF officials gave derisory responses, and the meeting deteriorated into an unproductive verbal shouting match.

MEC'S INTERNAL TROUBLES

18. (SBU) In addition to its other operational troubles, MEC suspended Chief Elections Officer George Chimwaza on April 13 for using MEC vehicles to support his wife's parliamentary campaign. Chimwaza has been replaced by Roosevelt Gondwe, Clerk of Parliament currently seconded to MEC.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Gondwe is a capable civil servant, and his substitution for the ineffectual Chimwaza is a welcome change. With less than a month to go before the elections, however, the challenges of removing the "extra" million voters on the rolls, of finding a fix for the MEC's budgetary problems, and of bringing efficiency to the organization may be insurmountable. END COMMENT.
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